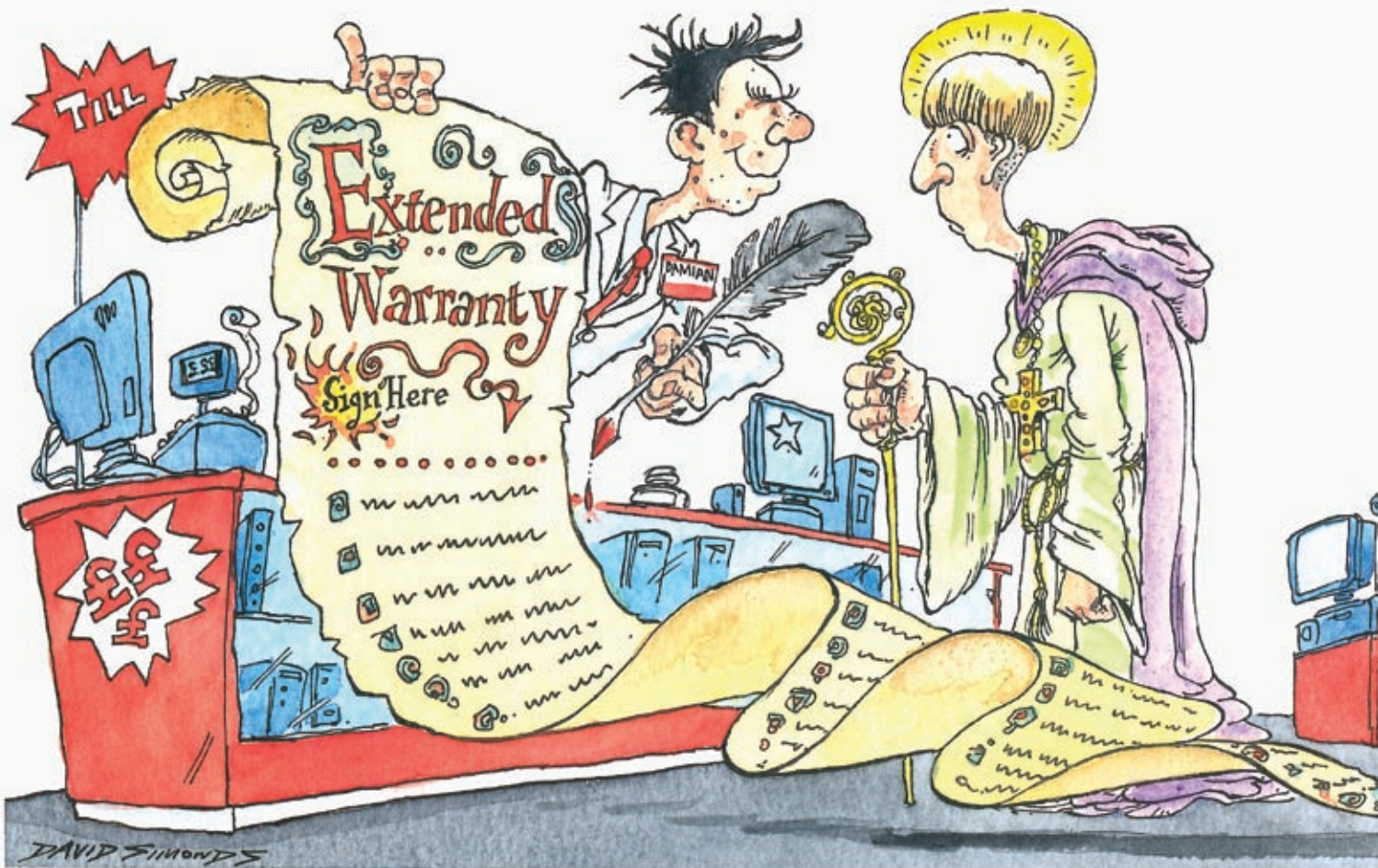




RANTS & RAVES

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness Mel Croucher look to the heavens for technical support and Simon Edwards try to sell his soul to the devil in return for an intelligible mobile phone tariff

SAINTS ALIVE

Mel Croucher RAVES

During my saint phase, I found it a bit of a strain to remain polite, especially at computer games fairs. People would kiss the hem of my robe or hold out their snot-encrusted children to be blessed, and I was always being beseeched to give my followers a sign. But I remained polite, and never failed to autograph icons of myself for any pilgrim who had crawled through the rain to Olympia or the NEC to bathe in my aura. And the cash came in handy.

But times change, and the computer industry slipped from the

hands of us holy men, and into the clutches of Damian. You know Damian. He works for your high street computer retailer and has no soul. His sole intent is to sell you an extended warranty and earn commission. But heed him not, because his warranties are false. The extended warranty market is worth £800 million a year. Dixons, Currys, PC World and The Link make 47 per cent of their pre-tax profits from warranties, and Comet earns almost 80 per cent of its profits from them.

And now Damian has started stamping "customer declined warranty" on your receipt, to burden you with great guilt. Damian also bears false witness. He told me his

£395 five-year warranty for my ultra-lightweight laptop was cheaper than the manufacturer's. The manufacturer charges £129.

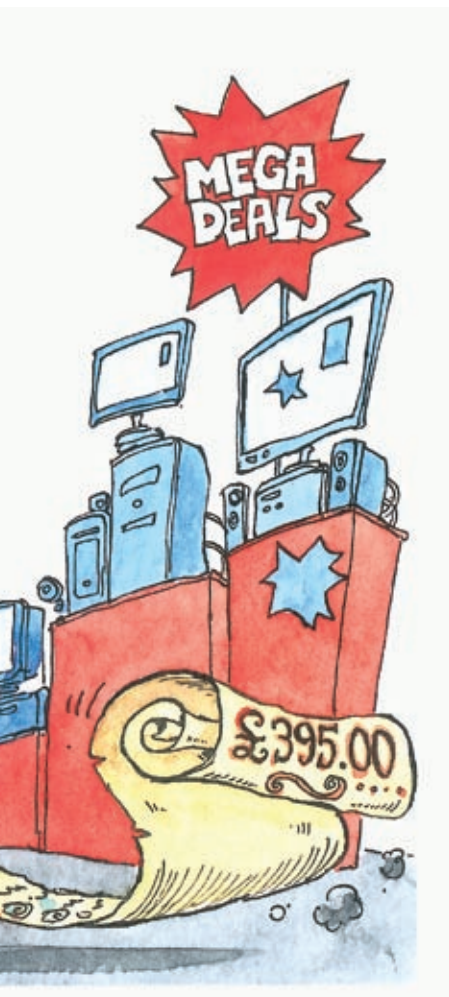
CARRY ON, PATRON

But fear not. I have had a revelation. When your computer goes on the blink, you do not need Damian's protection. What you need is the power of prayer. My brothers in the Catholic Church have set up a splendid website at <http://catholic-forum.com>, which lists all 5,035 patron saints. While they have inexplicably forgotten to add my name to their list, there are several others who are empowered to help out with your hardware and software warranties.

Your main man is Saint Isidore of Seville, who looks after computer users in general and the internet in particular. Another of my favourites is Saint Anthony, the patron saint of lost data. His support prayer line is toll-free and open 24/7. If you are a member of the sect of Apple worshippers, then your patron saint is Borromeo of Milan (1538 to 1584). Unsurprisingly, he is also the patron saint of ulcer sufferers and is usually depicted with a noose around his neck.

On the peripherals front, Saint Gertrude of Nivelles is on hand for anyone with a fear of mice, and Saint Augustine handles visual display problems. I had a bit of trouble finding a saint who offers a warranty for disk drives, but opted for Saint Catherine because she was martyred on a powerful wheel, which is probably what they called disk drives back then. And finally, the scourge of spam and email hoaxes can be cured by praying to Saint Eustachius (entrapment) and Saint Julian (clowns).

I expect you are wondering who my own patron saint is, and I will tell you. My money is with Saint Bartholomew, the patron saint of cobblers. Bless you all.



HELL IN A HANDSET

Simon Edwards **RANTS**

I met Satan once, and he tried to ensnarl me in a diabolical deal that sounded brilliant, with no catch. I would get loads of goodies, including a future-proof computer, 52 virgins, an unlimited supply of Carling lager and a list of mobile phone tariffs that I could understand. It sounded too good to be true, and it was. He was lying about the tariffs.

Why is it so horrendously complicated to work out the best deals? Is it the combination of free minutes, included text messages, the cost of each megabyte of data transferred using GPRS and the price of the supercomputer handset all factored in? Or is it that calls to mobile phones on other networks cost different amounts?

Maybe it is the difference in off-peak call prices, off-peak times and various weekends deals that casts a thick veil of confusion over what should be a simple buying decision. Some phone companies even charge 15p a minute for the first 15 minutes and then revert to 5p after that for the rest of the day. There is doubtless a system buried in

this demonic chaos, but no-one with a soul will be able to untangle it.

VIRGIN ON THE RIDICULOUS

The only solution that I've found is to commit to a service and see what happens. I was a long-time user of a Virgin Mobile Pay As You Go account. There were some limitations over a regular contract, such as a lack of call forwarding, but it worked well. It even let me make and receive calls from abroad.

But the ability to make and receive calls wasn't enough. I had to get clever and try connecting to the internet using a mobile phone. Much research indicated that the best deal would be a contract with another company. I duly signed my life away for one year and received a GPRS phone and access to a slow internet service that I've probably used three times in 12 months. The first two times were to check that it worked. The third time was a completely unnecessary effort to find a restaurant phone number while on a bus, just to prove to myself that I hadn't completely wasted my time and effort in getting mobile internet.

By the time I realised my mistake, I was trapped in a year-long arrangement that was costing me in excess of £30 a month, where previously I had been paying around a tenner. For my trouble and expense, I owned a phone with a colour screen and could synchronise it wirelessly with my PC (after I shelled out another £30 for a horribly unreliable Bluetooth adaptor). Whoopee.

A year on, and I've gone back to the Pay As You Go scheme with Virgin. My phone bills have been slashed by two-thirds and technically, if not in practice, I still

Fiend realised, just before I signed up, that I was a journalist and that my soul was, therefore, already his.

TALK IS CHEAP

Simon Edwards **RAVES**

When Bob Hoskins' chubby little face assured us that "it's good to talk" he was, pardon my French, stating the bleedin' obvious. Everyone likes a chat and telephones are, therefore, popular. And not just mobile ones, although these days anyone without at least two phone numbers is a freak deserving of unlimited scorn, if you believe the lifestyle magazines.

People have enjoyed communicating with remote friends and family ever since phones were invented. Even the expense of giving someone 'a ring' doesn't put us off. In 1886, one of the first phone boxes to use a coin slot was built in Bristol. You might expect the cost of a call in those days to have been very expensive. After all, the first public telephone exchange had been opened only seven years previously.

So how much did a three-minute phone call cost 120 years ago? The equivalent of just under one penny in today's money. You'll be lucky to find a modern public telephone that takes less than 20 times that in one go, although you should get a few more minutes. This is assuming that you can find a phone box in the first place.

FREE AND EASY

Finding the cheapest ways of calling is a hobby to some people. It's particularly important if you have friends and family living abroad.

that the service routes phone calls over the internet. For a fixed monthly fee of a tenner, you get to make and receive free calls within the UK, barring a few numbers including premium lines. And you don't even need a computer.

You do need a broadband connection, though, and unless you have access to a cable internet connection, that also means subscribing to a BT phone line. And that costs a minimum of £30 per quarter. But if you make a lot of phone calls, this is still a good deal.

There are lots of clever features that make this an ideal system for home office workers, too. If you will spend a lot of time away from the office, you can have calls forwarded to your mobile, or even a group of phones. Voicemail can be sent to you by email or stored on the Vonage website. Email notification can prompt you to log in and download MP3 files of your messages.

There are other VoIP services around, but I've not seen one as pleasant to use as Vonage's. It even passes the acid test, which involves calling elderly relatives and seeing if they can hear and understand what you're saying – at least as well as when using a regular phone service. Your mileage will, of course, vary depending on the physical quality of the relatives.

You can use your normal telephone and plug it into a small box that, in turn, is connected to your broadband router. If your home's power dies, your internet phone will stop working too, but you can always plug the phone back into your normal phone line socket in an emergency situation.

If you want to get really smart, you can build a Linux-based phone system (see *Linux Expert*, page 274) and connect it to your regular line and the Vonage system. Then you can play hold music, devise optimum calling routes, and even log in remotely (perhaps from an airport) and make calls from your house.

Sure, you could spend so long setting up your communications infrastructure that you end up with no friends to talk to. But for a small business or a household that simply wants a second telephone line, VoIP is a realistic option that you should seriously consider. ☑

The computer industry slipped from the hands of us holy men, and into the clutches of Damian. You know Damian. He works for your high street computer retailer and has no soul

have access to the internet using GPRS. That's because Virgin now supports it. In fact, just days after I signed in blood for my rubbish-value, Pay As You Sleep contract with another company, I heard that Virgin already offered GPRS. Still, it's nice to know it's there, even though I'll never use it.

And as for my deal with the devil, it fell through. Just as I was about to forge my destiny with the sulphurous, brimstone, fiery pits of hell, Old Nick reneged. The Arch

There are boxes you can attach to your phone line that transparently route your calls via less expensive carriers, and BT's own Friends and Family scheme is an easy way to cut costs. But there's a new, more exciting way that's making home telephones seem more interesting than ever before.

In May 2005, a telephone company called Vonage officially launched its services in this country. What makes it different from others you've probably seen advertised is

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